CHRONICLE AND COMMENT OF THE STAGE

"Someone in the House"

THE late lamented Dion Boucicault once remarked that "plays are not written—they are rewritten." George C. Tyler, who has produced as many, if not more, plays than any American producer now living, has good reason to know this. Some of the greatest successes he ever produced were so completely altered after their first "try-out" presentation that they would finally have been absolutely unrecognizable to the first audiences who witnessed them. "In the Palace of the King," for instance, as eventually produced in New York, did not contain fifty words of the original version. "The Squaw Man," when it finally reached Wallack's, had only one act of the piece as originally written. It was so with "The White Sister" and countless others.

Mr. Tyler is quite willing to admit, however, that his newest production, "Someone in the House," the latest "polite thief comedy" to interest and amuse Broadway, which opened on Monday night at the Knickerbocker Theatre, holds all records at all weights. It has been unquestionably the most rewritten play in the history of the American theatre, and that it at last seems to have found a successful anchorage on Broadway is a credit to the presistence and abiding faith of Mr. Tyler, who always insisted that its central idea, if properly developed, was what is technically known in theatrical parlance as "sure fire." The inside story of the play's genesis and evolution makes mighty interesting reading.

There were those in the enthusiastic first night audience at the Knickerbocker who seemed surprised that the programme contained the names of three authors as being responsible for "Someone in the House." They were Larry Evans, Walter C. Percival and George S. Kaufman. Plays by two authors are common enough, but a play credited to three—well, that seemed unusual.

What the audience did not know was that not three but upward of a dozen persons had had a hand in the writing and construction of this ingenious blend of melodrama and satiric comedy, and that if all those concerned had responded to the vociferous calls for "Author! Author!" they would have formed a line stretching from one side of the stage to the other.

It was back in 1915 that Mr. Tyler read two short stories in "The Metropolitan Magazine" written by Larry Evans. They dealt with the adventures of a young reincarnation of dear, delightful Raffles of immortal memory. The central figure in them was a debonair thief, possessing a love of adventure for its own sake and the social graces of a Metropolitan Opera House boxholder. In one of the stories the Dancer (that was his police tag) played a leading rôle in an amateur play given for charity at a fashionable Long Island country home and used the opportunity to purloin a diamond necklace.

Mr. Tyler, impressed with the dramatic possibilities of the stories, began to negotiate for the dramatic rights, and met Mr. Evans in the course of a consultation with the latter's agent. He was drawn to the young man by the latter's cleverness and personality, and suggested that he himself attempt the dramatization.

"I couldn't write a play," said Mr. Evans. "I couldn't even write an intermission."

"Well, make the trial," replied Mr. Tyler. "Make the draft of a scenario at any rate."

Mr. Evans was living at Saranac Lake for his health, and near him was living an acquaintance, Walter C. Percival, a young actor, who had written a number of vaudeville playlets. He called Mr. Percival to his assistance and the two mapped out a scenario which was submitted to Mr. Tyler. He liked parts of it and he disliked other parts. The central idea of the gentleman thief with a flare for romance was well preserved, but serious alteration was demanded in certain scenes.

The scenario went back to the authors, was altered in line with Mr. Tyler's suggestions and again submitted. This time it was accepted and the play began to assume shape. It was written and rewritten many times by the original authors, and finally seemed ready for production early in the fall of 1917. Shelley Hull was engaged for the leading rôle, a cast was organized and rehearsals began. As they progressed it was seen that there was something radically wrong with the construction of the early part of the play. The establishment of the Dancer's social position was not plausible enough, and there were other structural defects. An entirely new introductory scene seemed to be needed, and it must be written at once. Mr. Evans at that time was ill and Mr. Percival was playing in vaudeville. A member of Mr. Tyler's executive staff, with no previous experience in playwrighting, volunteered to undertake the rewriting of one or two of the unimportant scenes, but some one was needed instanter to write the new scene.

In this emergency Mr. Tyler called on his friend, the novelist-playwright, Captain Rupert Hughes. The latter sat up one entire night and entirely rewrote the introductory scene, which was laid in a New York club, filling it with the graceful and witty dialogue for which he is famous.

In this form the play was produced with Mr. Shelley Hull as the Dancer in Richmond, Norfolk and Philadelphia for "try-out" purposes. Something seemed to be lacking. The dramatic interest was not strong enough, it was felt. It was temporarily closed. Victor Mapes, a friend of Mr. Hull's and an associate of the former, worked out an entirely new scenario, but Mr. Tyler felt that it was no improvement on the original.

He applied himself to the task of reconstruction, calling in Frederick Stanhope, the stage director. Between them they evolved a number of structural changes, one of which demanded the dumping overboard of Captain Hughes's charmingly written scene, which was all right in itself, but which seriously interfered with the proper development of the story.

At this stage they called in young Mr. George S. Kaufman, the dramatic editor of "The Times" and the writer of much witty comment on things theatrical which has appeared in recent years. To Mr. Kaufman was assigned the task of whipping into actable shape the changes which had been made.

Mr. Kaufman applied himself assiduously to the undertaking, completely rewriting long stretches of the dialogue and infusing into it much of the wit which is now an essential part of the whole. In the mean time Mr. Hull had obtained an engagement with "Why Marry?" and H. B. Warner was engaged for the leading rôle.

In its thoroughly revised and altered form the play was produced at the Blackstone Theatre, Chicago, last winter, with Mr. Warner as the Dancer. It enjoyed a run of eight weeks there and seemed to excite interest and amusement. Something, however, still seemed to be lacking.

Accordingly its New York opening was put over until this season. All summer long Mr. Evans, Mr. Kaufman and Mr. Tyler worked on the manuscript, this time with an entirely new idea in mind. Jimmie Burke, the Dancer, was to turn out to be a detective at the end of the play, and a gentleman named Hargraves, who had always been a figure in the piece, was to be the real thief. To disarm the audience the clever Mr. Kaufman wrote in a speech in which one of the characters asks Glendenning, the author of the play within the play, why he didn't trying something new in HIS play, such as having the thief turn out to be the detective. This was written and spoken in a sarcastic vein.

Mr. Warner didn't like the change in the play, and after a long correspondence begged to be freed from his contract. Mr. Tyler, whose attention was so completely riveted on the piece that it was distracting him from all his other activities, peremptorily released him and engaged Cyril Keightley for the leading rôle. The play then had a production at a "try-out" week in Washington, about a month ago.

The producer now made an interesting discovery. It was that in preparing for his new "surprise" ending the first three acts of the play, which were originally the weakest, were enormously improved both from the consideration of dramatic interest and comedy. The ending, which was in the original play quite the best thing in the piece, was now in the new version the weakest link.

Keightley didn't like the new ending and resigned. In sheer desperation Mr. Tyler, with a New York opening staring him in the face and having apparently exhausted the list of possibilities among the "featured" players, decided to intrust the leading rôle to Robert Hudson, a personable young juvenile who had been appearing in one of the smaller rôles and who had won newspaper mention everywhere for his likable personality.

He now called in two of the best known "play doctors" in America—Brandon Tynan and William H. Post, both of whom have had a hand in the reconstruction of dozens of plays with never a line of credit on the programme. The piece was booked in Trenton for a single night prior to its presentation at the Knickerbocker. There was a rehearsal on the night previous which lasted until 4 o'clock in the morning. The new group of authors remained in the theatre until after 6 o'clock making alterations.

When the piece was played that night every one was unanimous in asserting that the one thing which at all militated against its certain success was the last act.

And so, at a convention of all the authors concerned in Mr. Tyler's office the following morning, a motion to restore the original ending of the original play was unanimously adopted by a rising vote!

So now Jimmie Burke doesn't turn out to be a detective and Tom Hargraves—well, you'll have to find out about the original "surprise" ending when you see it yourself.

Incidentally it may be mentioned in passing that Mr. Kaufman has dramatized Dulcinea, Captain Franklin P. Adams's well known lady friend. She is played by the vivacious and fascinating Lynn Fontanne and she scatters bromides all over the stage from the moment of her first entrance. Also, incidentally, Mr. Kaufman accomplished this feat overnight, having been told to "strengthen the part of Mrs. Glendenning" before Miss Fontanne reported for her first rehearsal. In the original version Mrs. Glendenning was a shadowy figure. Now she is one of the joys of the play. Certain critics have said that it was Hermione who has been dramatized. Mr. Kaufman wants to give credit to F. P. A. He insists that it is Dulcinea.

Finally, it may be mentioned that up to its New York opening the play was called "Among Those Present." The new title is a contribution of Mr. Tynan's.

Gretchen Yates in "An Ideal Husband"

Roma June in "Some Night."

Wilda Bennett in "The Girl Behind the Gun."

Carrol McComas in "The Walk Offs."

Otis Skinner and Elizabeth Risdon in "Humpty-Dumpty" ©Chas. Frohman, Inc.

Arthur Byron in "Tea for Three"

Wallace Eddinger

By Harriette Underhill

Wallace Eddinger is exactly the same off as he is on. By that we do not mean that he is "a very good young man," neither are we prepared, at the present writing, to say that he is not. We do not know, having seen him for only five minutes before he went on at the matinee yesterday and then snatching a word here and there between the acts.

It was his fault, however, not ours, for we were there long before they called "Overture," but Mr. Eddinger didn't have a chance to answer nearly all the questions we had come prepared to ask. In fact, he just had time to apologize for being late before he had to dash on and apologize to "Poila" for being late at her party, only he took her a box of candy and she wasn't nearly so nice about accepting his apology as we had been.

What we started out to say, however, before we interrupted ourself was that Wallace Eddinger's manner is exactly the same whether he talks to you face to face or across the footlights. He is the soothingest actor we know.

"As you know," said Eddinger, "acting is much like writing, and being natural is the most difficult thing in the world. No doubt when you started to write all sorts of people who knew nothing about it said to you, 'Just be natural.' That, too, is the advice of well meaning persons to young actors, and it sounds so simple.

"And sometimes you have an added handicap. You don't know whether you are being natural or not. For instance, in that second act, Leroy Gumph might have reacted in so many different ways. Now I want your opinion as to the way I play that second act."

Was this subtle flattery, we wondered, or did Mr. Eddinger really want our opinion? It was unusual but pleasant to be asked for an opinion on second acts and the way they are played, and we determined to make the discussion last as long as possible. We had plenty of time now, for Mr. Eddinger didn't go on in the third act until after Osprey Mandelharper had had her telephone conversation with Bijou Roach, of Flatbush, and had refused Elmer Erdwurm's hand in marriage. We knew Eddinger's cue to go on, having seen the play twice. It came after Elmer warned Osprey that unless she married him she might be a "social pyorrhea."

"I'll tell you why that second act was so difficult of solution: I couldn't decide how it should be played. You see, it happened so long ago that I can't remember just how it feels to be under the stimulus or the sedative influence of one's first drink. And then a very good young man would probably not be at all obnoxious, even when he was intoxicated.

"People who drink are seldom amusing save to themselves, and I had Roy Gumph figured out as a person who never would make very much trouble, no matter what his condition might be. So my conduct gave me as much concern as it did Pearl Hannigan.

"Not only in the second act, but in all of the acts, the psychology of Gumph was not so simple a matter. It wouldn't do to have him too polished; neither did I want him to be too great an ignoramus. I tried to feel like a shipping clerk who had a Sunday suit and another suit and a lot in Flatbush partly paid for out of a salary of $17 a week."

It seemed to us as though Martin Brown, who wrote the comedy of society in Greenpoint and East New York, had not only put into the mouths of his characters some of the funniest lines we ever listened to, but that he had drawn very definite characters about whom there could be no mistake.

But then, of course, it is one thing to be introduced to a person via a manuscript and quite another thing to meet him on opposite sides of the foot lights. And it is almost impossible for the layman to separate an actor from his part. So we shall continue to feel that Leroy Gumph belongs to Wallace Eddinger, though if the play's the thing, he really belongs to Martin Brown.

However, we do not believe that any other actor could make Leroy quite such a pathetic figure in the beautifully written scene at the end where he apologizes to Pearl for the paucity of his presents, which, to quote Ada Lewis, are "more intrinsic than costly." And we enjoyed so much the tears which we shed over this that we stole down into the first entrance to see him do it all over again.

New Plays This Week

MONDAY—At the Lyceum Theatre, Otis Skinner in "Humpty-Dumpty," a four-act comedy by Horace Annesley Vachell, presented by Charles Frohman (Inc.). Mr. Vachell is an English playwright, who is well known in America as the author of "Quinneys," "The Lodger" and "The Case of Lady Camber." Mr. Skinner's rôle in the new piece will be that of a hairdresser. He will be surrounded by a company that will include Elizabeth Risdon, who won success last season in G. Bernard Shaw's "Misalliance" and in "Seven Days' Leave"; Beryl Mercer, who is remembered for her splendid performance as the old lady in Barrie's "The Old Lady Shows Her Medals"; Ruth Rose, Maud Milton, Clara T. Bracy, Fleming Ward, Morton Selten, Robert Harrison, Ernest Elton, William Eville, John Rogers and Walter Scott.

At the Comedy Theatre John D. Williams will present Oscar Wilde's comedy, "An Ideal Husband." The following artists will have the principal rôles: Norman Trevor, Constance Collier, Julian L'Estrange, Cyril Harcourt and Beatrice Beckley. With the production of "An Ideal Husband" the new policy at the Comedy Theatre will be inaugurated—that of producing during the coming season a succession of comedies by an organization whose principal members will be those appearing in the present revival. It is purposed at the Comedy to follow the plan of those London theatres whose policy is a frequent change of bill, the chief players to form the nucleus of a resident company.

At the New Amsterdam Theatre, "The Girl Behind the Gun," Klaw & Erlanger's first musical comedy production for the season just beginning. The book and lyrics are by Guy Bolton and P. G. Wodehouse, and the music is by Ivan Caryll. The scenes of the new play are laid near Paris, at the home of a famous French actress. She has adopted a soldier in the trenches as her "godson." He is the cook of his regiment, and when the play begins he is about to pay her his first visit. Instead of the poilu she has adopted, however, arrives a handsome playwright, who to further a scheme of his own has persuaded the friendly cook to change places with him. The complications that ensue form the rest of the plot. Donald Brian will appear as the playwright and Jack Hazzard as the actress' flirtatious husband; Ada Meade will have the part of the actress, and Wilda Bennett will impersonate the wife of the playwright. Others in the cast are John E. Young, Frank Doane, Bert Gardner, Eva Francis, Virginia O'Brien and Cissie Sewell.

At the Harris Theatre, "Some Night!" a musical comedy by Harry Delf, presented by Joseph Klaw. Music, lyrics and book are by Harry Delf. The production is staged by Julian Mitchell and W. H. Post. The cast is headed by Forrest Winant and Roma June. Others in the cast are Charles Welsh-Homer, Camilla Crume, Grace Edmonds, Louis Simon, Thomas H. Walsh, James C. Marlowe, Charles W. Meyer, Charles Hall and Jesse W. Willingham.

TUESDAY—At the Morosco Theatre, "The Walk-Offs," a new comedy of metropolitan life by Frederic and Fanny Hatton, presented by Oliver Morosco. The central figures are a young Kentuckian with old-fashioned ideas as to women and a New York girl with a thoroughly worldly point of view. She is a member of a family which has kept its place by every trick known to fashionable paupers. She overhears him tell what he thinks of her and her friends and arranges to be introduced to him as a stenographer. When she has captured him she reveals her identity, but the Kentuckian is not to be defeated, and the story works out to an amusing conclusion. In the cast are Carroll McComas, Fania Marinoff, Frances Underwood, Roberta Arnold, Edmund Lowe, Fred L. Tiden, Charles A. Stevenson, William Roselle and Percival Moore.

THURSDAY—At the Maxine Elliott Theatre, "Tea for Three," a comedy by Roi Cooper Megrue, presented by Selwyn & Co. It presents a new angle on the triangle, with Arthur Byron, Margaret Lawrence and Fred Perry each playing a corner. The curtain will rise at 8:15 sharp, and during the playing of the first scene of the first act, which occupies twelve minutes, no one will be seated.

At One-Week Houses

STANDARD—Margaret Anglin will be seen here in the military love comedy, "Billeted."

SHUBERT-RIVIERA—Arthur Goodrich's play, "Yes or No," is the attraction. In the cast are Adrienne Morrison, Marjorie Wood, Robert Kelly and Edward Mackay.

LOEW'S SEVENTH AVENUE—"Getting Together," the musical war play by Ian Hay (Major Beith), J. Hartley Manners and Percival Knight, starts here on Monday. The cast is headed by Holbrook Blinn and Blanche Bates.

BRONX OPERA HOUSE—"Oh Boy," the musical comedy success by Guy Bolton, P. G. Wodehouse and Jerome Kern, comes here with the same cast as appeared at the Princess Theatre.

MAJESTIC—Booth Tarkington's comedy, "Seventeen," will be next week's bill at this Brooklyn theatre.

MONTAUK—Mary Ryan will be seen here in "The Little Teacher."

Vaudeville

PALACE—The features of the bill are Valeska Suratt, Avon Comedy Four, George White, and the premier presentation by Arthur Hopkins of the playlet, "Moonshine," with Edwin Hayes and company. Others on the bill are Williams and Wolfus, Ruth Roye and Sergeant Bowman and Corporal Shea, of the United States Tank Corps.

ALHAMBRA—"An American Ace," taken from the four-act patriotic melodrama of that name, is the chief feature of the bill. In the supporting bill are Lillian Fitzgerald, singing comedienne; Jack Patton and Loretta Marks, Dugan and Raymond in "They Auto Know Better," and Arthur Pickens and company in "Their Wedding Day."

ROYAL—Lucille Cavanaugh makes her first appearance in a new offering of dances and songs. McKay and Ardine will be seen in a skit entitled "All for Fun," Williams and Wolfus present a comedy entitled "Hark! Hark! Hark!" Others in the bill are Kimberly and Page, Donald Kerr and Effie Weston, Neil McKinley and Ned Norworth and company.

RIVERSIDE—Stella Mayhew and Van and Schenck share the headline position. Francis Renault in female impersonations, Bert Baker and company in a skit entitled "Prevarication," Frederick Courtney and company.

COLONIAL—Janet Adair, singing comedienne, and Blossom Seeley, in syncopated songs, are the two chief features. Jack Norworth will present the comedy skit from "Odds and Ends of 1917," called "Somewhere with Pershing." Others on the bill are the Kirksmith Sisters, Robbie Gordone, Sheehan and Rogay and Miss Merle and company.

LOEW'S AMERICAN—The Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday bill includes Canfield and Cohan, Dorothy Toye, Tom Mahoney; Chisholm and Breen. "Stolen Orders" will be the photoplay. The latter part of the week, "The New Model," Sally Berch in songs, and Linton and Lawrence in a skit will be the features.

Summering in the Cinema

This was the second time we had been to see Geraldine Farrar with a view to interviewing her, and again we were so concerned with what she wore that we almost forgot to listen to what she was saying.

"I am in motion pictures because I cannot sing my operatic rôles in the summer and because I simply must work. A period of inactivity is torture to me. Pictures, happily, offer me the opportunity I crave. They demand that I rise at 7 and keep on the go until sunset. I love that. I have an insatiable desire for knowledge.

"I love pictures, too, because one feels that whatever one does will mean something in the end. Not because one's efforts are destined to immortality, please understand, but because the field is new and progress is made every month. One works for better things, and is carried on by the knowledge that there is always a chance for improvement.